

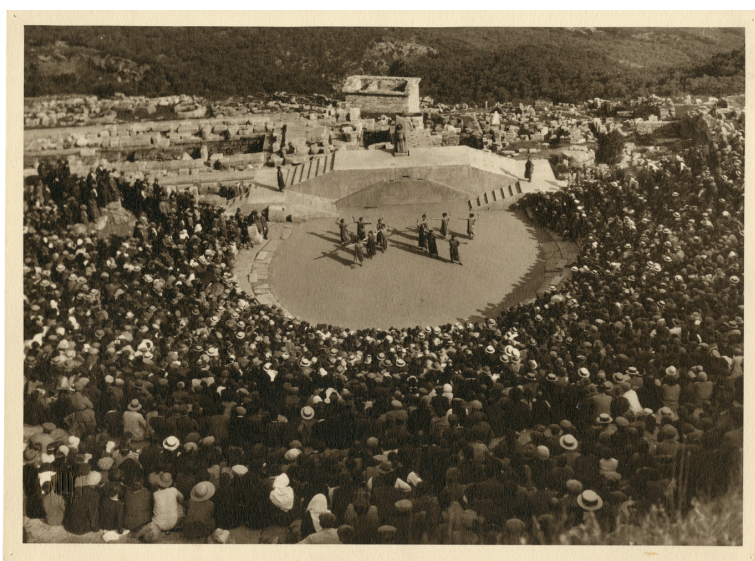
Returning to Heterotopias  
by Eleftheria Ioannidou



When I started researching the adaptation of Greek tragedy in postmodernism for my doctorate back in the noughties, it was early, yet exciting, days for classical reception. This new hybrid discipline was prompting classicists to take account of the historical contingencies that give meaning to the past and to rethink their own institutional role and input. Modern Greece, the state, its institutions and national education, but even the most quotidian aspects of life in the country were obviously prime material for this new turn towards classical reception. The uses of the classical past in modern Greece bring to the fore in striking ways the institutional and ideological struggles surrounding assumptions of a timeless, static, and immutable antiquity.

This is exactly the context in which I started looking at the ancient theatre of Epidauros and its summer festival: the way it is treated as a “natural home to Greek drama” by critics, but also how it is venerated as a site where everything that is utopian about Greekness can be acted out and reaffirmed but also undermined and subverted. Not so much a utopia of Greekness, but a hetero-topia, to borrow Michel Foucault’s useful term, Epidauros became in modern Greece this *other space where differences are negotiated*, but also a

normative and often essentialising pattern through which national identity could be reified. As one critic wrote “This theatre runs in our DNA”. The phrase still makes me cringe; perhaps more so today, over a decade since I first analysed it as typical of a pervasive national narrative. No doubt because a dense decade of “Greek Crisis” and the rise of neofascism in the country have made us infinitely more suspicious of banal nationalism, as well as more willing to problematise the ideological and cultural impact of archaeolatry.



My work on ancient theatres in modern Greece as national heterotopias developed therefore at the junction of classical reception with Modern Greek studies, but ultimately took shape through my participation in the Oxford Modern Greek seminar. It is a product of the seminar not only because, unlike the rest of my work, it has a clear modern Greek focus, but in the

sense that it allowed me to treat the classical text, the performance, the spaces, and the



ideologies as a powerful assemblage. An assemblage that keeps framing the way Greeks conceptualise what it means to be Greek. My more recent work on ancient theatre and fascism in the inter-war period continues to engage with similar questions, now in a larger

comparative frame, but with the same sense of political urgency.

To return to the original context in which I presented and then wrote “Toward a National Heterotopia: National Theaters and the Cultural Politics of Performing Ancient Drama in Modern Greece”. Greece was still celebrating its continuity with antiquity, living through the post-Olympics



surge in national pride. Ancient theatres were popping up everywhere – and indeed, a pop-up version of Epidaurus even became the stage for the 2006 Eurovision song contest final hosted in Athens. I remember watching that final, tongue in cheek, on a large screen

in Oxford with my colleagues. Thinking about how to deconstruct all this was not presented to us simply as an intellectual task. It was becoming a pressing political gesture to expose and reassess the tyranny of antiquity over modern Greece – a country that still needs to use the adjective “modern” in order to assure its presence on the global stage. This is why research groups such as the Oxford Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, as well as the Modern Greek Seminar, felt like fertile ground for these explorations. A laboratory of arguments and ideas that were both urgently needed and, elsewhere, persistently disavowed.

I cherish my participation in those spaces, that opportunity to benefit from the engagement with cultural studies and identity politics, with those methodologies, theoretical ideas, and the subaltern voices that Greek academia had kept at bay. Looking back at those times, I think of the Modern Greek Seminar itself as a heterotopia; an-*other* space, but this time one where we could stage a different performance of our classical pasts.

Note: You can read Prof. Ioannidou's article "Toward a National Heterotopia" on the publisher's website

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/435014> and on Researchgate

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236722107\\_Toward\\_a\\_National\\_Heterotopia\\_Ancient\\_Theaters\\_and\\_the\\_Cultural\\_Politics\\_of\\_Performing\\_Ancient\\_Drama\\_in\\_Modern\\_Greece](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236722107_Toward_a_National_Heterotopia_Ancient_Theaters_and_the_Cultural_Politics_of_Performing_Ancient_Drama_in_Modern_Greece)